

Proverbs: The Way of Wisdom

Big Idea: Wisdom is aligning our way with God's way.

Purpose: To challenge people to seek wisdom.

Passage: Proverbs 1:1-7

Verse: Proverbs 1:7

Opening

The Fork in the Road

Every day we come to a fork in the road.

Not a literal fork in the road.

We come to places where we have to choose which path to take. **Do we go this way or that way?** Studies show we make up to 35,000 decisions each day, 200 just about food and beverages. Some of these decisions don't have a



lot of consequences. But some of our fork in the road decisions have a ton of consequences. We are faced with regular fork in the road decisions on how to spend our money, how to spend our time, how we do life with friends and family. We have to make decisions on where to work and where to live. We have to make decisions with significant moral consequences. *There is a lot at stake. The choices we make, make us.* When we come to a fork in the road, which way do we go?

-I can never remember a season in my lifetime when I faced such consequential decisions with such little experience or expert advice. I have been looking for a book entitled - *How to Relocate a Church During a Pandemic*. It doesn't exist. I have been looking for a book about how to quarantine well in a house with 4 people and 2 dogs. It doesn't exist. When I call the people in my life to whom I normally look for advice they admit they aren't sure what to do either.

-I often feel like **Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz**. ***Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking.*** Ha! That's the problem we often ask for directions from people who don't have the expertise to properly direct us.

-What we need is a life expert. *Wouldn't it be great if we had someone to call every time we reached a fork in the road?* Wouldn't it be amazing if there were an app for that? Or if Siri could help us choose the right path. *That's*

what the book of Proverbs is all about. It's a book about choosing wisely. It equips us to make decisions that align our way with God's way.

Context/Overview

-Today we begin a new series on the **Book of Proverbs** subtitled ***How Not to Be a Fool***. Let's set the stage a bit. There are three groups of people who dominate the Hebrew Scriptures. There are ***prophets*** who speak for God. There are ***priests*** who facilitate the sacrificial system. And finally, there are ***sages*** who provide everyday wisdom. The prophets, priests and sages do not disagree. They complement one another. Only certain people could be prophets or priests but *anyone can be sage*.

-Sages give us our wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures. The three primary wisdom literature books are Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs. These books provide us with wisdom for everyday life. Sages observe life to glean tried and true principles. Sages tell us how life is meant to work. We tend to pay a lot of attention to our prophets and priests, but not nearly enough attention to our sages. Modern-day sages could be counselors or spiritual directors or even scientists. All of these fields are devoted to observing life and gleaning principles for how things work. In the book of Proverbs, we are being schooled by wise sages; men and women who have observed life and know how life is meant to work. The advice is given through poetic speeches and sayings called *proverbs*.

-The Book of Proverbs has a simple layout. There is a brief introduction which we will explore today. Chapters 1-9 contain 10 speeches. They are essentially a father-son talk. An older and wiser dad is imparting wisdom on how to live to his young son. The advice could certainly apply to a mother-daughter or mother-son talk as well.

Chapters 10-29 are a collection of hundreds of proverbs. Most of them are not spiritual. They are advice for everyday living. Proverbs concludes with some final poems, including one about godly women.

-Science studies the way the world works physically. This substance added to this substance produces this result. A brick dropped off a roof will fall. Things like that. Proverbs isn't about how the world works *physically*. Proverbs is about how the world works *morally*. **Proverbs teaches us the art of living.**

-Proverbs uses our immediate surroundings as the classroom. Look at foolish person. Watch their actions – they are going to lead down the wrong path. They are going to get hurt. Do you see that person over there? Watch out for them. They will catch you in their web and you will never get out. Proverbs is trying to prepare us to live skillfully in the world. Proverbs is trying to teach us the moral landscape of life. When you open and read the book of Proverbs, it's like going into a room of people who are older, wiser, and more experienced than ourselves, and who all want to help us make the right decision. The book of Proverbs is like a *portable counselor*; it's just packed full of good advice, and you can take it wherever you go.

Let's read the opening passage which kind of serves as the introduction for the book. This introduction is basically one sentence in the Hebrew. We tend to skip over introductions, but they are valuable in that they give us an overview of what is coming in greater depth. **Pay attention.**

Public Reading (Kellie)

-The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: ² for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; ³ for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; ⁴ for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—⁵ let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—⁶ for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:1-7)

Proverbs 1:1-7

What is a proverb?

-I am indebted to my friend and Hebrew scholar, **Dr. Tim Mackie** for teaching me a lot about the Book of Proverbs. I encourage you to check out resources about Proverbs on the ***Bible Project*** website. (*bibleproject.com*)

-The introduction tells us we are about to read proverbs. *Biblical proverbs are little sayings that are backed by lifetimes of experience.* It is as if you could collect generations of wise people in a room and have them collectively agree on general truths on life. As you would read a proverb, they would all nod their heads and say *Yes, that is so true.*

-Here are two examples. *Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own.* (Proverbs 26:17) How did this proverb come into existence? Someone grabbed a stray dog by the ears and got bitten! That same person got between two people fighting and said that was like grabbing that stray dog by the ears. They are the same.

Here's another one. *Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.* (Proverbs 26:20) Someone stopped feeding wood into a fire and watched it die down. Then they stopped talking badly about another person and watched their quarrel die down. They realized they were the same. These proverbs would not have been recorded if they were isolated experiences. They got passed on from generation to generation and written down because many people found them to be true. Proverbs are accumulated experience. Proverbs tell us how life works.

-It is important to realize what proverbs are not. **Proverbs are not promises or guarantees.** Proverbs describe how things *often* work not how things *always* work. **Proverbs are generalizations.** They are generally true. Proverbs 22:6 reads, *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.* (Proverbs 22:6) If we raise our children to follow the way of Jesus, they will generally do so. But some will not.

-Here are a few modern proverbs that are generally true – but not always: *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.* Unless it is a long absence and we just forget the other person. *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.* Unless you are allergic to apples. *Best things in life are free.* Some free things are free for a reason. *Crime doesn't pay.* Unless you get away with it.

-**Proverbs are not commands.** Check out this confusing proverb. *Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.* (Proverbs 26:4-5) Should you answer a fool or should you not answer a fool? What should you do? That seems confusing, doesn't it? **It is only confusing if you take that as a command. It is not; it is a proverb.**

-**Every proverb is not appropriate all of the time.** Proverbs need to be used at the right time. It's like a savings card for a local grocery store. Sometimes I am at Safeway and I whip out my Target card and try to scan it. The clerk's like, "Wrong card, buddy." The card has value, but at Target, not Safeway. There are times when you should answer a fool and there are times when you should not. It takes someone with skill at living to know the difference.

Authorship

-The introduction tells us that the proverbs we will be reading are proverbs from Solomon, Son of David. We know that Solomon did not write all of the Book of Proverbs. There are proverbs in the book from anonymous sages and other sages who are named. Some of the proverbs were composed hundreds of years after Solomon.

-Wisdom books in Hebrew Scriptures were typically a group effort composed over time. King Solomon was known as the patron saint of Israel's wisdom literature, so the book points to him as the primary shaping influence. It is assumed that portions of the book came directly from Solomon and other parts from those who followed in his tradition.

Audience

-Verse 4 of the introduction tells us who the audience is. The audience is those who are *simple and young*. The Hebrew word for *simple* means *untaught*. The simple and young are people who are *morally naïve*. They are often open to anything and everything. They can be impulsive. They don't always think before they act. The simple and young need to be taught and shaped to walk the right path.

Purpose

-The introduction tells us the purpose of the book of Proverbs in verse 2. The purpose of the book is that its readers would *gain wisdom*. The book was written to pass along wisdom. Wisdom or the wise is mentioned 4 times in the introduction. Wisdom is mentioned over 30 times in the first 9 chapters. It is the key idea of the book. What exactly is wisdom? When we think of wisdom, we often think of intellect or an accumulation of knowledge. But that is not what the Biblical writer is thinking.

-The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah*. Say it with me - *hok-MAH*. *Hokmah* is a *high degree of skill in any domain*. The word is used in the Bible to describe technical or artistic skills, skills in governing, skills in diplomacy and skills in warfare. *Hokmah* is an attribute of God. God used *hokmah* to create the world. It is this invisible creative force woven into the fabric of the world. It is how things are meant to work, how they were created by God to work. It is the backbone of the moral law of the universe which creates a cause and effect pattern no one can escape. Wisdom is personified in Proverbs as a woman - Lady Wisdom. Women, you should be like - *Amen!*

The closest English equivalent might be *expertise*. LeBron James has *hokmah* on the basketball court. Yo Yo Ma has *hokmah* with a violin in his hands. Flannery O'Connor had *hokmah* with a pen in her hands.

- *Hokmah* in Proverbs is *living skillfully*. It is not just accumulating knowledge. It is putting the knowledge into practice. As verse 3 states, it is *not just receiving instruction but doing what right, just and fair*. It is living with expertise based on God's instruction and by observing how people live otherwise. We could define wisdom as *aligning our way with God's way*. It is aligning our path with God's path. We grow in *hokmah* as we listen and learn to live according to the way things were created to work.

-Wisdom is not a destination we arrive at, but a path we are meant to walk. This is the primary metaphor in Proverbs. We will see lots of stuff about pathways. *When confronted with the fork in the road, the wise person chooses the way that aligns with God's way.*

-Proverbs also talks a lot about *the fool*. The fool is not an unintelligent person. The fool is someone who refuses to align their way with God's way. They think they know best. They are not listening to the wise sages. They are ignoring Lady Wisdom. They do not possess *hokmah*. They are not living skillfully. They are not living in the way life was designed to be lived. We are continually presented with this choice in Proverbs. Will we walk the way of wisdom or go the way of the fool?

Essentially, Proverbs is a book about *how not to be a fool*.

The value of wisdom

-The book of Proverbs wants us to understand the value of wisdom. We see this theme again and again throughout the book:

Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. ⁶ Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. ⁷ The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. ⁹ She will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown. (Proverbs 4:5-9)

-The father is pleading with his young son to seek wisdom. He tells him to sell everything he has to acquire it. It is incredibly valuable. He tells the son that the first step to becoming wise is to seek wisdom. I can't help thinking of my

girls when I read this. I have lived long enough to know how many foolish people there are in the world. I have been one of them. I have lived long enough to know all the things that will entice them away from the path that leads to life. I pray that they seek wisdom. I long for that. I don't want to *tell* them what to do. I want them to learn how to live skillfully so they will *know* what to do. How do we cultivate wisdom?

Cultivating Wisdom

We must take God seriously.

-In the introduction to the book of Proverbs we are given the first step to cultivating wisdom. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* (Proverbs 1:7) This is the thesis to the entire book; the foundation of the way of wisdom. What the alphabet is to writing; what numerals are to math; what notes are to music; the fear of the LORD is to wisdom.

-*Fear of the LORD* is a difficult phrase to translate into English. Some phrases don't translate well. It would be like trying to translate *hit the books*, *face the music* or *go cold turkey* into another language. When we hear *fear of the LORD*, we naturally think it means we are meant to be scared of God. I love to jump out from behind corners or doors and scare our girls. They try to scare me as well.

This is not what the Hebrew phrase means. Being scared of God is not the beginning of wisdom. A better translation for the word *fear* would be *reverence or awe*. It is the sense you get when you stand and look out at the mighty ocean, or you are standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or you are staring out at snow-capped mountains, or when we survey the night sky. When we do this sort of thing, we don't feel fear - we feel reverence or awe for something that is so much bigger than anything we could ever imagine. It right-sizes us. It puts us in our proper place. This is the sense the phrase is meant to convey.

With that said, when confronted with the immensity and awesomeness of God, it is natural to feel out of control. This is well represented in a conversation between Susan and Mr. Beaver in C.S Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Mr. Beaver tells Susan that Aslan, who represents Jesus, is a great lion. Susan responds, "*Ooh, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.*" Mr. Beaver laughs, "*Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good.*"

That is fear of the LORD. God is good. We don't need to be scared of Him. But we should certainly be in awe of Him. *Fear of the LORD* is shorthand for being in proper relationship with God. We know who we are and we know who God is. Old Testament scholar John Walton says that the best translation of *fear of the LORD* is *taking God seriously. The first step to wisdom is to take God seriously.*

-The phrase *fear of the LORD* is used 18x in the book of Proverbs. It is the golden thread that holds the book together. The phrase is used in the introduction and in the conclusion. This is called an ***inclusio***. It serves as bookends. All wisdom makes no sense apart from taking God seriously.

-When I first moved here, I took my dog Elijah to the coast to go hiking. Some friends told me to go to Pacific City and hike the sand dunes to get a good view. So, I made poor Elijah trudge to the top of the sand dune. When you get to the top, there are some cliffs on the left that jut out into the sea. It looked like they would offer incredible views. The only problem was that the only way to access the cliffs was fenced off and signs were posted that said *danger*. Well, I often take signs like that as suggestions. I figured that someone had done something stupid and that they had to post those signs for legal protection. I figured it was perfectly safe for an experienced hiker like myself. Elijah and I talked about it, and he convinced me to give it a go. So I looked to the right and looked to the left and we slipped through the fence. I was a fool. I didn't take the signs seriously. The book of Proverbs puts up all kinds of signs for us. Sometimes they are incredibly clear signs. We come to the fork in the road and proverbs says *danger this way. **To have the fear of the LORD is to take God seriously and to trust that His way is the best way.***

-We come to the fork in the road. The wise person fears the LORD. Why? The psalmist proclaims, *Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. ⁹For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.* (Psalm 33:8-9) We fear the LORD, we take God seriously, because He created the world, He created us, He knows how life is meant to work. The wise person takes God seriously and seeks to align their way with God's way. According to Proverbs 14:27, this mindset will lead to the fountain of life. This is the pathway to flourishing. Eugene Peterson translates Proverbs 1:7 by saying, "*the first step to learning is bowing down to God.*" (Proverbs 1:7, MSG)

The fear of the LORD means bowing to God. It is humility to acknowledge who God is and who we are. The fool disregards God's way. The fool does not take God seriously. Fools despise wisdom. Fools, to use the words of Proverbs 3:7, *are wise in their own eyes*. Twice, Proverbs tells us that if *we go our own way it will lead to death*. All of this brings greater clarity and color to the most well-known verses in Proverbs: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.* (Proverbs 3:5-6) This is the first step in the way of wisdom. We must take God seriously as we seek to align our way with God's way.

-When I go backpacking in National Parks, we are often 20-30 miles into vast wilderness. Sometimes we go days without seeing another human. We are dependent on our map to guide our way. We will often come to a fork in the road. We get out our handy topographical map and spread it on the ground. But our topo map is useless without what? Our topo map is useless without a compass. We use our compass to find *true north*. When we know true north, we can orient our map to discover which way to go.

Taking God seriously is true north. The way of wisdom can only begin by properly orienting ourselves to the presence of our awe-inspiring God.

-This week, when you come to the fork in the road, or maybe you are presently sitting at a fork in the road, I want you to ask yourself - *am I taking God seriously?* Is God's will central to deciding which way I go? If you are like me, often my own will is central to deciding which way to go, or someone else's will is central to deciding which way I will go. That is the way of the fool - the way that leads to death. The way that leads to God is to take God seriously by putting God's will at the center of our fork-in-the-road decisions.

We must listen to wise voices

-The second step in cultivating wisdom is that *we must listen to wise voices*. This is another dominant theme in the book. We will introduce it today and dig into more in the coming weeks.

-Our introduction in verse 5 gives us a primary characteristic of wise people. We are told wise people listen. Proverbs 12:15 says it like this, *The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.* (Proverbs 12:15) Fools don't seek advice, but wise people listen to advice.

But whose advice should we listen to? Proverbs gives us the answer. *Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.* (Proverbs 13:20) Wise people listen to wise people. Foolish people listen to foolish people.

-Part of my personality profile is *learner*. I love to learn. My friends, and certainly our staff, know that whenever we come to a fork in the road, I am eager to seek advice from experts. When I was diagnosed with heart disease, I feverishly began to seek expert advice on things I could do to address my heart disease. As you can imagine, if you Google advice for heart disease, you will get tons of advice, much of it contradictory. The key is to listen to the right voices. I chose to listen to the experts. I disregarded the blogger writing from his parent's basement. I tuned out the voices of people who had no schooling and training in medicine, food science and exercise science. Too much was at stake. If I was going to make changes so I could live a long life, I wanted to listen to the right voices.

I listened most notably to my heart doctor who trained under one of the top heart doctors in the country. I take an aspirin every day because he told me to take an aspirin every day. There are tried and true studies showing the benefits of people with heart disease taking an aspirin a day. I quit eating red meat and adopted the Mediterranean diet because the Med diet is the only diet that has been tested and shown to have a positive result for people with heart disease. I also aspire to walk 15,000 steps a day. I do this because a scientific study compared Scottish mail carriers with people who sit all day in an office and revealed that 15,000 steps is where the heart-healthy difference occurred. I told you I dug deep.

-Wise people don't just listen to advice. Wise people listen to the **right advice**. When you come to the fork in the road, are you listening to advice? Whose voices are listening to? Are they wise people? Are they experts at living? Are they people who take God seriously? This week I want you to make a mental list of the people who you listen to for advice. That's your homework. Next week we will dig deeper on this point.

We must practice the way of wisdom.

-Finally, how do we cultivate wisdom? *We must practice the way of wisdom.* To be good at anything we have to practice.

Most sports have been canceled, but thankfully, *Nathan's Annual Hot Dog Eating Contest* still happened this year on July 4th. Once again, Joey Chestnut



prevailed by eating 75 hot dogs and buns in 10 minutes to set a new world record. Joey is the #1 competitive eater on the planet. He has won the event 13 times in 14 years. How does Joey win year after year? How does Joey keep breaking world records? **He practices.** ESPN did a whole show on his training regimen. He does all these crazy-looking mouth exercises including

chewing on a ball like a rapid dog. He lifts sacks of weights attached to a mouthguard and practices his gulps. I miss sports. I am so desperate, I have resorted to using competitive eating for illustrations. Feel free to make fun of Joey, but he has become a millionaire.

-Malcolm Gladwell famously figured out that you had to do something 10,000 times to become an expert. If we want to become wise, we must *practice* wisdom. Wisdom is not something we are born with. Wisdom is something we acquire. Back to Proverbs 13:20. It says, *walk* with the wise and become wise. Highlight the word *walk*. In Proverbs 4, the father tells the son that *if he listens to his advice, when he walks his steps will not be hampered*. We become wise by walking the right way again, and again, and again, and again, until it is second nature. **There are no short cuts.**

-Let's start today. We will be faced with a ton of forks in the road today. When we come to the fork in the road, we need to ask the questions that Andy Stanley calls the best questions ever – *What is the wise thing to do? What choice will align our way with God's way?* And then take that path. And then do it again. And then do it again. And do it again.

Closing

Wisdom is a matter of life and death

-We have been introducing our girls to some of our favorite movies during quarantine. We recently made our way through the 4 Indiana Jones movies. The best is ***Indiana Jones and the Search for the Holy Grail***, without a doubt. Please don't argue with me about that.

At the end of that movie, Indy's dad is dying and Indy needs to secure the Holy Grail cup so his dad can be healed. Indy has to choose the right cup from a hundred of so random cups. If he chooses the right cup, it will give life.

If he chooses the wrong cup, it will bring death. The evil Nazi guy is there is well. The old knight guarding the cups looks at them says, **choose wisely**. The evil Nazi guy did not choose well and his face melted. Indy chose well because he is Indy.



-Those two words sum up the book of Proverbs
- **choose wisely**. The **path of the wise leads to life. The path of the fool leads to death.**

-That is really what it come down to - **a matter of life and death**. Here is what Lady Wisdom has to say, *Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not disregard it. Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For those who find me find life and receive favor from the LORD.* (Proverbs 8:32-35)

-When you come to the fork in the road today, know that there is a lot at stake. Our lives are largely shaped by all the small decisions we make on a daily basis. Those decisions become habits. Those habits become a way of life. *Choose wisely. The choices we make, make us.*

Communion prep/Jesus

-The purpose of communion is to help us remember. Jesus knew we would forget. We come today, remembering that we are nothing apart from the gracious intervention of a loving God. Our path is one of destruction. But God intervened and offered a new path. Look what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24: *Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* **Jesus is the ultimate wisdom of God. Jesus is hokmah. When we align our way with the way of Jesus, we are walking the ultimate way of wisdom.**